DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 140 754 HE 009 068

TITLE	The University as an Organization: System and Environment. Current Projects. Educational Development: Information on Research and Development in Post-Secondary Education.
INSTITUTION	National Swedish Board of Universities and Colleges, Stockholm. Research and Development Unit.
PUB DATE	77
NOTE	5p.
AVAILABLE FROM	R & D Unit, The National Board of Universities and Colleges, P.O. Box 16334, S-103 26 Stockholm, Sweden
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Comparative Analysis; *Decision Making; Educational Administration; *Educational Change; *Foreign Countries; *Higher Education; Institutional Autonomy; Operations Research; Power Structure; Social Change; Systems Analysis; *Systems Approach; Theories; Universities
IDENTIFIERS	Sweden; University of Umea (Sweden)

ABSTRACT

The transition from an elite university to a mass university has characterized modern university life. The purely quantitative development has been accompanied by a number of changes in the decisionmaking system in higher education. No systematic comparative studies exist of the development of the decisionmaking system. A project is under way at the University of Umea in Sweden to: (1) formulate a theory of the decisionmaking system by means of which the changes in higher education can be analyzed, and (2) apply and illustrate the theory in a few studies. Autonomy and influence patterns will be major considerations in the studies. A final report will be presented in 1978. (MSE)

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Educational Development

ED140754

Current projects

1976:7

Title of project: The University as an Organization System and Environment

In progress at: Department of Political Science, University of Umeå, S-901 87 UMEÅ
Phone 090-12 56 00

Project leader: Ass. Prof. Jan Erik Lane

Background and purpose

The transition from an elite university to a mass university has characterized modern university life. The purely quantitative development has been accompanied by a number of changes of various kinds in the decision-making system. Traditional structures have been abandoned and new groups within the university participate in the making of decisions. At the same time the relations of the university to its environment have changed in that university activities today are controlled by public authorities to a greater extent than they used to be. These changes in the decision-making system manifest themselves differently in different countries. No systematic, comparative studies exist of the development of the decision-making system. The purpose of the present project is to formulate a theory of the decision-making system by means of which these changes can be analysed and to apply and illustrate the theory in a few studies.

Arrangement

The decision-making system of the university can be analysed with the aid of the concepts autonomy and influence, using a theory concerning the relations between autonomy and influence.

a) Autonomy

In the debate on university autonomy it is generally agreed that the traditional autonomy of the university tends to decline (Glenny and Dalglish, 1973, Berdahl 1972 and Seabury 1973). However, no attempt has been made to elucidate and define the term "autonomy", just as no attempt has been made to construct scales by means of which autonomy can be investigated comparatively. It is therefore an important task for research to introduce an explicit concept of autonomy and to operationalize that concept so as to make comparative studies possible. By

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P.O. Box 16324
S-103 26 Stockholm
Sweden

analysing the concept it will be possible to show that there are different types of autonomy and that different types of units, such as individuals, groups and societies, can be autonomous to a greater or lesser degree.

If a number of distinctions are introduced in the concept of autonomy, the decision-making system within the university organization can be subjected to a new analysis. One such distinction is that between *external* and *internal* autonomy. With the aid of the concept external autonomy it is possible to analyse the dependence of the university on its environment, above all the extent to which public authorities control university activities. An analysis of the internal autonomy of the university will be concerned with the degree of decentralization within the system, given a certain measure of external autonomy. Internal autonomy can be measured using either organizational subunits (e.g. the department and the administration) or the individual member as a unit. In this project the department will be placed in the foreground. How is the degree of departmental auotnomy affected by changes in the composition of the governing bodies and by the tendency towards a reinforcement of supra-departmental bodies? It is also possible to analyse the effects on departmental autonomy of an expansion or retardation of its resources.

The analysis of internal and external autonomy can be refined by distinguishing between different fields of autonomy, and hypotheses can then be formulated concerning the relationship between internal and external autonomy. Is there a correlation between a high level of external autonomy and a high degree of decentralization? Is there a definite pattern regarding the degree of external autonomy in different fields, so that – for example – a university with a high degree of autonomy with respect to the recruitment of its governing body tends to enjoy less external autonomy in other fields than a university which does not recruit its own governing body?

b) Influence

The analysis of the autonomy of the university system gives us half the truth about the control of its activities. Decisions governing non-autonomous behaviour can be influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the person or organization who performs the action. Firstly, the university may have mechanisms of various kinds at its disposal vis a vis its environment, mechanisms by which it can influence decisions restricting its autonomy. Influence can be exerted via various forms of participation in a decision-making process or via various forms of representation in public bodies. Secondly, the departments within the university may have a greater or lesser degree of influence on the decisions of the governing body via various forms of participation and representation. The actors may obtain compensation for non-autonomous behaviour by influencing the decisions governing behaviour of this kind.

The ability of a university or a department to control its behaviour is a function of its autonomy and influence. Both the external and internal aspects of a university decision-making structure can be illustrated by means of a diagram.

Autonomy / Influence	Low	High
Little		
Much		

c) Autonomy and influence

It is presumably inadequate to maintain that what characterizes the university decision-making system is that it is anarchic (Cohen & March, 1974). The university

decision-making system presents recurrent patterns and structures which do not differ greatly as between different university systems, or at all events between university systems of different types. An analysis of the decision-making system in terms of autonomy and influence can point to the existence of definite ways whereby the university and its constituent parts can control their behaviour. An analysis of this kind would also demonstrate the triviality of the idea that the decision-making system is distinguished by the fact that it constitutes a political system (Baldridge, 1971), since autonomy and influence are always present in contests for power and in conflicts.

What explains the degree of external autonomy and influence of a university or university system? Why do the university system of the USA and England enjoy more autonomy than those of France and Sweden? Why have the departments in the USA been so successful in retaining their autonomy and influence whereas departments in Holland, Denmark and Sweden tend to lose both autonomy and influence?

The degree of external and internal autonomy enjoyed by a university or university system and the influence exerted at both levels can be related to different factors.

1. Political variables: the extent to which the exercise of public power is centralized, the degree of pluralism in society, the ideological structure of party politics, the extent to which equality is a goal of government politics, the extent to which the state regulates the behaviour of private organizations and individuals, the position of academic organizations.
2. Economic variables: the extent to which universities are financed out of public funds, the size of the public sector.
3. Cultural variables: the confidence of society in the universities, the value which society puts on academic activities.
4. Variables of university organization: the size of the university, the position of its professors, the position of non-permanent staff, the position of the students.

Strategy

The theoretical part of the project consists of an analysis of the ways in which the university and the department can control their activities and of an inventory of factors which can explain the degree of autonomy and influence enjoyed by the university and the department. The empirical part of the project comprises applications of the theoretical analysis to university systems in various countries. A case study will also be made, namely an analysis of the situation and future of the Swedish departments.

Timetable

The project began in 1974. A final report will be presented in 1978.

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Civiltryck AB Stockholm 1977

LF/ALLF 282 77 004
ISSN 0346-6175